

Statement of
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Ranking Democrat, House Subcommittee on
Telecommunications and the Internet
Oversight Hearing on Digital TV Transition
February 17, 2005

Good Morning. I'd like to commend Chairman Upton for calling this hearing today to further explore issues related to the transition to digital television (DTV).

Today's hearing will explore issues related to ending analog television broadcasting. I think, for our public policy discussion, we can safely assume that the analog era will end on a date certain. This is largely because budgetary interests will force a hard date for shutting down the analog signal in order to obtain proceeds from any auctions for licenses to use frequencies that the broadcast industry vacates. The question remains which date to choose.

My feeling is that the date should be driven not by budgetary considerations but rather by our telecommunications policy goals. We must be mindful that television penetration in the United States exceeds telephone penetration. The Government Accountability Office will report to us this morning that some 21 million households in country rely exclusively upon free, over-the-air analog broadcasting. On average, American consumers also have multiple television sets in their households. And today, all over the country, consumers will be walking into a store and rather than buying a DTV set, they will buy yet more analog television sets, and these TV sets typically last 15 to 20 years, or longer.

There is little debate that getting the analog TV spectrum back soon can offer consumers and taxpayers alike important public interest and economic benefits. Importantly, even freeing up the upper portion of the broadcast spectrum for public safety would be a significant public interest achievement that has also eluded the Federal Communications Commission for several years.

At its core, the DTV transition represents a government-driven policy, not a purely market-driven phenomenon, and it is therefore imperative that

government create the conditions and environment for policy success. In this context, any transition plan that abruptly cuts off analog television service must come only after consumers have been adequately informed of the impending shut-off of service. Moreover, it should only occur after the government has fully implemented a program to effectively identify individuals who may warrant a subsidy to buy needed equipment so that they do not lose TV reception in their household. And in considering a timetable for this purpose we must remember that neither the FCC nor the Commerce Department has any experience in administering this type of program. Finally, a date certain shut-off of the analog television feed should arrive only after consumers have had sufficient time to make the purchases they need to continue receiving television broadcasts in the digital TV era.

Another integral component to any early, and less costly, “date certain” shut-off of the analog signal is the notion that cable operators will take the digital signals of broadcasters and “down-convert” such signals to analog. In other words, millions of cable consumers would receive their local TV broadcasters in analog format, rather than in digital format, in order to bring the DTV transition to a more rapid conclusion.

I believe we have to have a discussion of the consumer impact of “down converting” a broadcaster’s signal. Over the next couple of years, millions of consumer will make investments in digital television equipment - - and millions more may be induced to make such purchases if the government is advertising that it is ending the analog TV era on a certain date. If we permit the “down-conversion” of the quality of the broadcaster’s signal in order to end the DTV transition early, will there be any policy of “up-conversion” of that signal back to its original digital format further down the road so that all cable consumers eventually get to see the digital quality picture the broadcaster is delivering to the cable operator?

These are important issues that the Subcommittee must explore over the coming weeks and months and I look forward to further hearings on the DTV transition where we can explore further consumer impact of any transition plan as well as issues related to multi-cast must-carry and the public interest obligations of broadcasters in the digital age.

Again, I want to congratulate the Subcommittee Chairman Mr. Upton for calling this hearing and commend as well Ranking Member Mr. Dingell

and Chairman Barton for their continued efforts in making our digital television policy work for the country.

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